

Council chair urges board, teachers to reach contract 'for the students'

By Claudia D'Souza
Special

For the sake of the students, a representative for Halton's five Catholic high schools has urged the school board and its teachers to return to immediately return to the bargaining table.

In the past 10 weeks, escalating teacher's work-to-rule sanctions have left students with no extra-curricular activities and lost instructional time. At the root of the dispute, is a Bill 160 requirement that teachers' workloads be increased by 1,250 hours per week. The board has interpreted this to mean seven of eight periods must be taught.

Tuesday night, Bishop Reding (Milton) school council chair, Paul McDougall, a parent representing board-wide secondary school council chairs, delivered his message in a board room packed with parents, teachers and students.

"When you get to the end of the rope, turn around, there's a whole length in front of you," he said. "Our purpose is not to take one side over the other, but rather to advise the board and its teachers of our concerns and recommendations."

McDougall proposed re-starting negotiations to end the "intolerable" situation and re-examine difficulties from a fresh perspective. He advocated the creation of a "creative log jam breaker," a panel with new and equal representation from the Halton Catholic District School Board (HCDSB), the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) and school councils to examine agreements reached in the province.

A report by the panel to the board and the teachers' union giving suggestions for an agreement cross-referenced to negotiated agreements should be delivered within 14 days and then be presented to the full board and both negotiating committees, he said.

Students are suffering from cancelled classes, no extra-curricular activities and increasing tension within the schools, McDougall stressed, and to bring home his point, he introduced student council presidents from five area high schools.

"I represent a group of frustrated students," said St. Thomas Aquinas OAC student, James Ng. "The school has been left in disarray...with words like lock-outs and work-to-rule whispered in the halls every day."

"Students can't approach

teachers, barriers have been put in place and marks at all grades are suffering," added Chantel Blattler, of St. Ignatius of Loyola. "This is the third time in my five years at this school that I've experienced this type of upheaval. I want to get off this roller-coaster ride. Time is critical."

"Get over it, talk about it and settle it," advised Assumption's David Dowe. "You are ruining the best years of our lives."

Notre Dame's Tia Duke argued sports keeps students motivated and skills gained via extra-curricular activities have a huge impact on student's lives.

Matthew Rowe, of Bishop Reding, pleaded with the board to put aside differences and make students its first priority.

In analyzing what has happened, McDougall believes the education system's experienced too much change, too quickly, which has, in effect, created confusion among trustees, teachers, parents and students.

"Over 600 classes have been cancelled since Thanksgiving. There's been a loss of trust on both sides. We want to keep students in a positive learning environment and we want a negotiated settlement, not arbitration, and the re-introduction of extra-curricular activities in a safe, strife-free manner."

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